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The Intelligence Mystique

Two totally different kinds of enterprise run through the recent rash of spy cases. First are operations involving largely technical information. Then there are the tricks intelligence services play upon one another.

Abundant evidence suggests confusion—even self-delusion—at the highest levels between these almost opposite kinds of business. Sorting out the difference and developing some sense of relative priority present a rich opportunity for renewal to those battered institutions, the intelligence oversight committees of Congress.

The Walker case provides a current example of an operation centering on technical information. For numerous reasons what the Walkers and their friends did poses acute threats to American security.

The Walker ring had access to data concerning the positioning, movement and communications of American submarines. The subs, along with bombers and missiles, form the famous triad of nuclear weapons constituting the American deterrent. But adversaries know where the missiles and bombers are based, and both could be erased in a first strike.

The subs are much less vulnerable because, in theory at least, their positions and communications are secret. If positions and communications became known, however, even the submarines could be taken out. Thus the Walkers may have passed on data affecting the least vulnerable leg of the triad—a truly vital key to American security.

Their motive for espionage, moreover, was particularly pernicious. During World War II, spies such as the Rosenbergs and Klaus Fuchs acted with ideological motives. Because of association with various left-wing causes they were easy to identify and not hard to run down.

But the Walkers were in it for the money. Their case shows that nearly all Americans hungry for money—not merely those with a particular set of political ideas—are possible spies. Surveillance, instead of being concentrated around a relative handful of people, has to include everybody with access to secret information.

That kind of surveillance, the Walker case also shows, comes with great difficulty in this country. American counterintelligence, in fact, is lamentably weak. John Walker, the mastermind of the spy ring, worked with the Russians for 17 years before being uncovered. Discovery came not as a result of some coup by the Navy or the CIA or the FBI. A rift in the family led a suspicious wife to reveal what she thought to the authorities. Except for that accident, the Walker ring would still be doing its stuff.

But after a first ripple of alarm, the highest authorities are keeping cool. The plea-bargaining arranged with John Walker means there will be no trial—and no public disclosure of what damage the Walkers did. William Casey, the director of Central Intelligence, in an interview with Time magazine recently, said of Soviet espionage efforts: "I don't think they have been notably successful in operations in this country."

Most significant of all was the comment made by President Reagan at his news conference of Sept. 15. "The Walker case," he said, "somehow doesn't seem to look as big as it did a short time ago, now with what we've seen happening in other countries."

"What we've seen happening in other countries," of course, refers to the entirely different kind of intelligence operations—the games played by one intelligence service on another. Specifically, Reagan had in mind a series of defections associated with moles planted by the intelligence service of one country upon another. Thus two high KGB officials defected to the United States in the spring and gave information on various Soviet moles in the West. In August four spies planted by the communists in West Germany sneaked back to East Germany. In September a longtime Soviet double agent defected in Britain, giving information that led to the expulsion of more than a score of Russian agents there.

Clearly, the president believes that the tricks played by one service upon another have a much higher value than the collection of technical information. Casey seems to share that view, and the plea-bargaining in the Walker case confirms the judgment that fooling the rival intelligence service takes top priority.

But should it? Aren't the games services play upon each other a hall of mirrors? Don't they just work to keep everybody confused? Does anybody believe moles? Doesn't the information they furnish mainly pander to a taste for inside gossip? Isn't the whole game reinforced by the mystique of intelligence officers, particularly those with wartime experience, for derring-do as opposed to solid information of a technical (and therefore dull) kind?

I don't know the answers to these questions. But the country ought to have them. The United States, after all, spends billions on intelligence. There is no clear national sense of even elementary priorities. The congressional oversight committees, which have almost given up since failing to affect CIA operations in Nicaragua, could become relevant again by rendering a basic judgment about how the country uses—and misuses—its vast intelligence resources.